

COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

True tales from the annals of history, archaeology, construction, and
restoration of the Casa de Bandini and Cosmopolitan Hotel.
Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

VOL. III. No. 21

SAN DIEGO, ALTA CALIFORNIA, JULY 31, 2009

PRICE: FREE

The 1872 Old Town Fire

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Old Towners and a few lucky New Towners danced the night away at the Cosmopolitan Hotel until long after midnight on the evening of Friday, April 19, 1872. The *San Diego Union* reported that it was one of the most successful dances ever given in Old Town.

About 10 a.m. Saturday morning, April 20, the face of Old Town changed drastically. A fire broke out between the ceiling and the roof from a stovepipe in the old Court House building occupied by Rudolph Schiller as a general store. Flames quickly consumed the building and rapidly spread to adjacent buildings. Old Town landmarks, the Colorado House and the Franklin House, were destroyed.

Because there was no firefighting apparatus in Old Town it was a wonder that any building survived. According to the reporter for the *San Diego Union*, "all that saved the Seeley House (the Cosmopolitan Hotel) was the tile roof of the house of Mr. Estudillo, which

prevented the fire from reaching across the street." Tile roofs then, like today, were one of the best construction features for fire protection. By the time the Hook and Ladder Company from New Town arrived on the scene, the fire had done its damage and their main service was helping with all the merchandise scattered around the Plaza.

Merchants worked frantically to save their property. However, the confusion and the mess proved profitable to the local Indians. According to the newspaper, "all of the Indians living for miles around the city of San Diego gathered together and scrambled for the coffee, sugar, etc., etc., spilled by the impatient citizens in their efforts to rescue goods from the flames." Undoubtedly there were many recyclers that day.

Fire Marshal E.W. Nottage complemented James McCoy, W.W. Stewart, and others for their services at the fire. Mr. Nottage reported these losses: M. Asher, merchandise \$1600 to \$1800, no insurance; D. Wallach, stock and building \$2500, no insurance; R. Schiller, stock \$2000, no insurance; J.S. Mannasse & Co., four buildings and merchandise \$14,000, insured for \$7000; Dan Clark,

saloon fixtures, stock, etc. \$250, no insurance; Mrs. Soledad, building occupied by Bank Exchange saloon, \$200; other miscellaneous properties \$300.

Mr. Wallach was lucky in that some of the merchandise he expected on the most recent steamer had not arrived. Almost immediately saloon keeper Dan Clark set up shop in another location. Some of the merchants like Mr. Schiller occupied empty spaces on the east side of the Plaza. And Mr. Mannasse decided to wait for the insurance settlement.

The opinion was frequently expressed that had the pump on the Plaza not been broken, the fire could have been stopped sooner. The original pump workmanship was supposedly so defective that it was impossible to keep it operating. And precautions were strongly urged for protecting against sheet iron stovepipes coming in contact with wood.

Fortunately photographs of Old Town had been taken by Mr. C.P. Fessenden the day before the fire. Those images and others by early photographers help archaeologists, historians, architects, and preservationists with projects such as the restoration of the Cosmopolitan Hotel.

